

EUROPEAN RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM
9TH CONGRESS

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EURAU18 alicante
RETROACTIVE RESEARCH
CONGRESS PROCEEDINGS

ISBN: 978-84-1302-003-7
DOI: 10.14198/EURAU18alicante

Editor: Javier Sánchez Merina
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Titulación de Arquitectura

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In search of the place of being ready-to-hand

Uncovering reciprocity between architectural design research and philosophy

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Synopsis

Based on Graham Harman's illuminating interpretation of Heidegger's concepts of *ready-to-hand* and *present-at-hand*, the paper elucidates some of the consequences of such an analysis for an architectural design research existentially revealing. Once this is done the argument is reversed by disentangling how acts of design research fine-tune Harman's philosophical revelations. In this way possibilities for architecture influencing philosophy are outlined and discussed.

The paper first describes *ready-to-hand* and *present-at-hand* in design research terms and their implications for *authorship* and *agency*. Secondly the paper suggests paths for a research that acknowledges the agency of the world in the navigation that humans perform through design processes. In conclusion some findings are shared towards the dissolution of authorship as an issue the designer-researcher-philosopher should not be misled about. An alternative concern instead might find design emerging as the unending *placing* of being-nested in the world that unavoidably transforms philosophies in retrospective ways.

Key words: Design research, Heidegger, materiality, architectural theory, agency

1. Ready-to-hand and present-at-hand from Heidegger to Harman

Harman takes Heidegger's philosophy radically reduced as the revelation of the two fundamental ways of the being of things as ready-to-hand (Zuhandenheit) and present-at-hand (Vorhandenheit). As I will illustrate, this dichotomy is synthesised as "the relation between contexture and singularity in the entity"¹. According to Harman the philosophy of Heidegger – although voluminosely extended – is resumed mainly in explaining in many different and complex ways this one and only thing.

So Heidegger suggests on the one hand an object is ready-to-hand when its existence disappears into the context withdrawing from our attention. On the other hand, in the most common Heidegger's interpretations, an object instead is considered as present-at-hand when it we focus on it and individualise its existence in the simultaneity of ours. Harman calls *broken tool* to this coming into focus and intensity of the thing in relation to other things.

However, Harman takes Heidegger's binary concept to a radical consequence suggesting that what Heidegger implied is that the condition of Dasein is not a privilege of the human being but that it permeates anything that is.

This radicalisation of the concept of Dasein makes design-research to become a way to navigate the world by which every entity triggers a response from every other. Design-research is hidden in the infinite of the possible and brought to light in the evidence of the consequence of being with other beings. As human beings it seems easier for us to understand this by examples that include us. When we sleep we design our being in bed. We intuitively knead the pillows, if we feel we need them; we shape our body to them and shape them in tune with the position we are inclined to in that moment. We nest as birds do; we get into place as cats pawing the same pillows to settle there.

However Harman's interpretation of Heidegger invites us to consider the world as this context of individual beings in the process of becoming. For the purposes of the discussed dichotomy it is equal to be a human being than to be a cat, or a flock of dust, or an atom, or a triangle, or an idea, etc. However, does the flock of dust perform design-research? Is it meaningful exploring how things design-research other things and the whole context? Can I be air to design flow? Can I be fish to design medium? Can I be number to design pattern? The flock of dust is in an individual and unique way for the beam of light. And vice versa, the ray of light is revealed by the established relation with the flocks of dust. And as insignificant as the flock is, it still contributes with casting that tiny bit of shade for the light to be revealed.

¹ Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., U.S., 2002), p.55.

2. Two modes of design-research and their implications for *authorship* and *agency*

Let me now examine what are the implications of these modes of experiencing, and being in the world for the concept of design-research. First I am conceiving design-research as a twofold pulsation in the flow of existence composed by outcome and journey. These pulsations are manifold and constant in such a way that only for the purposes of pointing at them we are able to individualise the pulses of outcome-journey-outcome-journey.

Design-research as ready-to-hand is what we do to settle in our everyday engagement with the world. Involuntarily we navigate this world towards our being in place. This does not mean that we are ever out of place but that we move across places; we navigate. In Heidegger's fashion we could say that we engage in worlding. Therefore, I suggest that design-research in this mode emerges as a particular navigating of our being in which we attempt to better place ourselves; we move towards nesting so to say, to accommodate us to the world and vice versa. It is design because is done towards something. It is projected into the future in order to better place us. It is research because it moves us across places in order to find our place.

Design-research in the mode of being present-at-hand is instead what we do when the problem solving aspects of our navigation emerge into our focus. When we direct our intentionality to what Harman calls the *broken tool*. We do this by isolating in our concern the issue of our problem solving process. In that case we might become aware of our part of agency in the process. However, the fact that we have agency in the process does not reduce the agency of the rest of the things of the world; their agency might just be out of our main concern. Design-research in this mode is resolute, focused and individual.

3. Acknowledging the agency of the world and the design-researcher

The process of design-research is formed by the acts of navigation in the flow of being that we can identify as belonging to a field, a space of influence in our looking for our place. In both modes of design-research we have a space of influence; and that is what I would call our agency. Agency though is given in different ways when the design-research is being ready-to-hand than when it is being present-at-hand. We may be more aware of our agency within the design-research as present-at-hand since the performance of design comes forward to our consciousness. In that case we assign some authorship to us.

However, if authorship is the partaking of agency, how much authorship can we claim? I suggest that in the answer to this question we might uncover the hidden immensity of the relevance of the world and our own insignificance as design-researchers.

4. Some initial reflections about knowing as the constant believing that we know

If the significance of authorship emerges as reduced, if not always dissolved, in relation with the process as a flow of existence, how can we benefit from a design-research journey that oscillates between its disappearance within the contexture and its epiphany of individuality? When we believe that we are in control, are not we being misleadingly naïf and being distracted from our inclination to a better nesting? Is there any meaningful place for the arrogance of a designer's role in a journey that involves many other things for the design to emerge?

It is not my intention suggesting a teleological concept of design-research in which the emergence of certain outcomes of the processes is considered as necessary or inevitable. I do not think the bicycle was unavoidable in our technological evolution. However, I suggest that – having the world been arranged in other ways – the bicycle could have not happened. Although this might still be open to debate, I hope it could be ontologically dispelled. Dasein is – I believe – complex, infinite and mysterious. And when I say Dasein I am not only referring to the human being. I am also saying, along with Harman, that all entities are Dasein. Everything is there and – within that everything – by design-researching we navigate.

5. Bibliography

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Biography

Fidel Meraz is Senior Lecturer in Architecture in the Department of Architecture and the Built Environment of the University of the West of England, Bristol. He is a trained architect who has worked in architectural and design education and research in both Mexico and the UK. He has taught at the University of Nottingham, Nottingham Trent University and the University of Suffolk. At the latter he developed and directed the Interior Architecture and Design course. In practice, he has worked extensively in Mexico, Italy and Central America on diverse projects from private housing to commercial fashion malls.

His research focuses on philosophy and theory of architecture, mainly with a phenomenological perspective. He explores issues about the relationship between architecture, temporality, and place such as collective memory and spatial identity, and architectural heritage conservation. His PhD at the University of Nottingham offers a phenomenological account as a critique of modern architectural conservation taking Cesare Brandi's *Theory of restoration* as a case study. He has published and presented a number of papers at international conferences on architecture and philosophy.

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